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# Final Environmental Impact Statement

## Mt. Hood Meadows Parking Improvements EIS

**Mt. Hood National Forest, Hood River Ranger District  
Hood River County**



Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Lift



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# **Mt. Hood Meadows Parking Lot Improvements**

## **Final Environmental Impact Statement Hood River County**

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# Executive Summary

## Background

On peak days and weekends there is inadequate parking capacity at the Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort (MHM). MHM has seen a steady increase in skier visits over the past ten seasons and managers anticipate this trend would continue at a slightly higher rate than the estimated population growth of the Portland metropolitan area. Therefore, there is a need to provide additional parking to serve the current use at the ski area. Additionally, the need for expanded parking was identified in the Record of Decision (ROD) for Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Area Master Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (Master Plan), including Forest Plan Amendment No. 10 (January 1997; p. 10).

When parking facilities are filled to capacity at the ski area, customers choose to park along the access roads to both the Main Parking Lot (Forest Service Road [FSR] 3555) and to the Hood River Meadows Parking Lot (FSR 3545), Highway 35, as well as Sno-parks located near Nordic ski trails along Highway 35. Parking along the access roads and highway, however, creates an unsafe situation when people are walking along these roads to reach the shuttle pick-up points. Also, as people park along the Hood River Meadows access road (FSR 3545) and highway, the northbound and southbound traffic on Highway 35 is slowed, and at peak ski traffic times, temporarily stopped due to traffic waiting to turn across the southbound lane onto the access road. This congestion created by the traffic can limit ingress and egress by emergency vehicles and shuttle buses, constrain the ability for snow plow equipment to operate safely and effectively, and limit driver line-of-sight along Highway 35.

## Purpose and Need for Action

Because parking facilities at MHM are often filled to capacity, there is the need to provide additional parking within the MHM permit area. This need for expanded parking is also supported by the need to improve traffic flow and public and customer safety along the access routes (i.e., FSR 3545 and Highway 26) to MHM as well as within the Main Parking Lot.

The need for additional parking was identified in the ROD for the Master Plan (page 10). The need for new maintenance facilities also was identified in the ROD for the Master Plan (page 9). Therefore, the primary purposes of this project is to serve the design capacity for parking, including area for snow storage, and maintenance facilities that was conceptually approved while minimizing environmental impacts from parking lot construction and maintenance, as was outlined in the Master Plan in 1997.

## Proposed Action

In order to address the needs stated in Section 1.3, Alternative 2 proposes to build the Twilight Parking Lot and Sunrise Maintenance Shop. In order to provide additional parking to serve current use and the design capacity that was conceptually approved in the ROD and Master Plan, a 7.2 acre parking lot for both downhill and Nordic customers at the Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort would be constructed. This new parking lot, referred to as the Twilight Parking Lot, would be located east of the Elk Meadows trailhead and west of the Oregon Department of

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Transportation (ODOT) maintenance yard with access via FSR 3545. In total, 9.4 acres would be cleared for this parking lot, snow storage, and a storm water facility. The overall parking capacity for MHM would be 3,526 vehicles, including the additional 878 vehicles from the Twilight Parking Lot.

Also, to improve parking capacity as well as customer safety, the vehicle maintenance functions would be moved away from the Mt. Hood Meadows Main Parking Lot and located on the north side of the existing Sunrise Parking Lot. The new Sunrise Vehicle Maintenance Shop would be approximately 65 by 150 feet in size and constructed on 1.75 acres. The existing shop would initially be used for storage. The existing generators and electrical distribution would remain within the existing shop. It may be re-purposed for skier service in the future; however, this would potentially require additional site-specific NEPA depending on the proposed actions.

The Proposed Action also includes constructing the Twilight Parking Lot equipment maintenance yard (bus shop), constructing the associated access road, and constructing a Nordic guest services building. Lastly, the connected actions associated with this alternative are: installing utility lines (power, water, sewer and telephone) to service the new facilities; constructing left and right turn lanes from Highway 35 to FSR 3545; restoring an impacted wetland; and, constructing Nordic ski trails.

Overall, the Proposed Action would impact 17.6 acres of A11 lands within the Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort permit area, plus an additional 0.5 acres along Highway 35. This includes the acres of disturbance associated with the Twilight Parking Lot, Sunrise Maintenance Building, Twilight Parking Lot equipment maintenance yard (bus shop), utility lines, access road, and Nordic ski trail construction.

### **Alternatives**

In total, the Forest Service developed six alternatives: No Action (Alternative 1), Proposed Action (Alternative 2), and four other action Alternatives (Alternatives 3, 4, 5 and 6). The No Action (Alternative 1) is defined as the current condition and was compared to the underlying need for action. As discussed above, Alternative 2 was developed in response to a proposal from MHM. Alternatives 3, 4, 5, and 6 were developed based on public and agency issues and concerns.

Alternatives 3 and 4 were designed to address Issue 1: Master Plan Consistency as well as Issue 2: Nordic Skiing. Alternative 3 was altered from Alternative 2 in order to create a similar Nordic skiing experience as the existing conditions. Alternative 4 was designed to be fully consistent with the Master Plan. This alternative also moves the proposed parking lot location to minimize impacts to the existing Nordic ski trails. Alternative 5 addresses Issue 2 by moving the proposed parking lot location, but it more closely resembles the initial proposals submitted by MHM in overall parking capacity. Lastly, Alternative 6 was developed as the Preferred Alternative after considering public involvement and the environmental consequences presented in Chapter 3.

Some alternatives that would resolve public concerns were eliminated from detailed study because they do not meet the purpose and need for action, were not reasonably feasible or viable, were duplicative of the alternatives considered in detail, or were determined to cause unnecessary environmental harm. Five alternatives were considered, but eliminated from detailed consideration. The alternatives were: Highway 35 Temporary Bypass Repurpose Alternative; Bear

Grass Loop Parking Lot Alternative; Hood River Meadows (HRM) Expansion Alternative; Mass Transit Alternative; and., Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) Maintenance Yard.

### Effects Analysis

Implementation of any action alternative would cause some adverse environmental effects that cannot be effectively mitigated or avoided. The majority of the unavailable adverse effects are associated with removing forested lands and replacing them with parking lots and other paved surfaces within the MHM permit area. Most adverse effects can be reduced, mitigated or avoided by limiting the extent or duration of effects. The application of Forest Plan standards and guidelines, Best Management Practices, PDC, and monitoring are all intended to further limit the extent, severity, and duration of potential effects.

Chapter 3 provides environmental analysis of the all of the alternatives for each resource area including recreation, transportation, soil productivity, water quality, aquatics, wildlife, botany, noxious weeds, cultural resources, visuals, air quality and climate change. The following list summaries some of the findings detailed in Chapter 3.

- None of the alternatives would result in visitation levels that exceed the winter designed capacity established in the Master Plan for lifts, groomed ski trails, and skier service facilities (Master Plan, p. 9).
- Alternatives 2 and 3 would have the greatest effects on the existing Nordic trail system (including difficulty ratings). Alternative 2 replaces the curved undulating trails with much more straight/uniform trails. Alternatives 3 and 6 replace the loss of the trails with similar curved turns on undulating terrain. Alternatives 4 and 5, however, would only slightly modify the existing trails; thus, any changes to the skier experience and difficulty ratings would be negligible.
- Alternatives 4 and 5 would have the greatest effects on the existing hiking trails within the Permit Area. They would both require minor reroutes on Sahalie Falls Trail (#667C). All action alternatives would require the Sahalie Falls Trail (#667c) and Elk Meadows Trail (#645) to be temporarily closed while the utility lines are being installed to the proposed parking areas.
- Each of the action alternatives, may have an adverse impact on transportation operations of safety and congestion. The added traffic volumes for each action alternative may increase the existing transportation safety issues of US 26/OR 35, which are currently labeled as safety corridors. Alternative 2, 3, and 5 would have the most effect on increasing transportation operations of safety and congestion.
- If an action alternative is chosen, there would be an irretrievable loss of soil resource. Due to the total size in acres, Alternative 3 would be the most impactful overall. The Sunrise Vehicle Maintenance Shop has the least potential impact in Alternative 5 due to water and/or wetland considerations identified in Alternatives 2, 3, and 4. Alternatives 2 and 5 are nearly the same in overall acreage, but Alternative 5 maximizes the Twilight Parking Lot size in a different location, which then reduces the need to replace several acres of Nordic trail. Alternative 4 is the least impactful of all action alternatives due to the smaller footprint and location that reduces the need to replace Nordic trails.

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- All action alternatives would have some disturbance in the Riparian Reserves. Disturbance in the Riparian Reserves associated with the new Sunrise Vehicle Maintenance Shop in Alternative 3 has some risk of increasing water temperature, sediment and chemical contaminants due to the close proximity to a wetland/stream and complete removal of approximately 400 linear feet of riparian vegetation. Alternative 2 has risk of increased sedimentation due to snow removal limitations in the Sunrise Parking Lot footprint posed by the new Sunrise Vehicle Maintenance Shop. All of the above effects are anticipated to be localized and most likely only noticeable at the site scale. While all action alternatives propose to increase impervious surfaces, the total is still below levels of concern.
- The left- and right-turn lanes proposal is the same for all action alternatives. Potential impacts are an increased risk of direct effects to cutthroat trout and Scott's Apatanian caddisfly due to disturbance during construction activities and then small, short-term increases in fine sediment to Meadows Creek and potentially the relocated wetland adjacent to Highway 35.
- There would be no impact to Meadows Creek regardless of the action alternative from the proposed Twilight Parking Lot (and associated access road and maintenance area), Nordic ski trails, utility lines, or Sahalie Falls Trail re-route due to the location of the proposed infrastructure and PDC. The slight overlap with Riparian Reserves in some alternatives would not impair stream or floodplain function.
- Under all alternatives, suitable habitat for Northern spotted owls would be reduced in the core and home range for the spotted owl pair that are being impacted. There is **likely to adversely affect** call for this project across all alternatives because of the suitable habitat being removed. The amount removed when comparing all alternatives, however, never puts the habitat below US Fish and Wildlife Service thresholds for take. There are no disruption impacts from noise because work for all alternatives is outside the disruption distances. Alternatives 2, 3 and 6 keep the majority of the construction and removal farther from the spotted owl nest patch. Alternatives 4 and 5 are in closer proximity, but outside the disruption distances. Alternative 4 has the least amount of impacts because of smaller lot size and there is no new creation of Nordic trails keeping more of the project in the existing condition.
- Mule Deer and Elk would be impacted by Twilight Parking Lot, Twilight Equipment Maintenance Yard, and Nordic Trails in all action alternatives. Alternatives 4 and 5 are closer to the other summer disturbances and allows for more security in the north eastern portion of the permit area, while Alternatives 2 and 3 spread the components out and fragment more of the permit area, they also potentially impact migration routes in the east to west direction due to the rectangular forms of the lots creating a line of potential avoidance due to pavement when including the HRM Lot and ODOT maintenance yard.
- Snag and down log associated species would lose habitat, but at the project and watershed scales are not impaired overall.
- Neotropical migratory birds would lose some habitat associated with the action alternatives. The amount of tree removal for all alternatives, however, is small when compared to the habitat available within the watershed and on the District.

- A Moderate Noxious Risk ranking has been determined for each proposed action alternative for the following reasons: 1) Heavy equipment (implied ground disturbance including compaction or loss of soil); 2) Importing soil/cinders/gravel/straw or hay mulch; 3) ORVs (off-road vehicles) or ATVs (all-terrain vehicles) associated with project activity; 4) Plant restoration; 5) Recreationists (i.e., foot traffic associated and unassociated with the project); 6) Forest Service or other project vehicles.
- The improvements proposed in Alternatives 2 through 6 would permanently remove from 6 to 14 acres of huckleberry plants; however, some huckleberry rejuvenation may occur along the open margins of the parking lots and Nordic trails. The Project Design Criteria also specifies that all open disturbed areas would be seeded with native seed, which includes species common to the huckleberry-beargrass plant association. Mitigation measures developed in collaboration with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs (CTWS) have minimized impacts to culturally significant plant resources.
- All alternatives would have no or a negligible effect on climate change, greenhouse gases (GHG), or loss of carbon storage. The project proposes to permanently remove from 9.4 to 22 acres of forest trees to construct a parking lot designed to serve current use and improve public safety. The generation of GHG during construction, maintenance, and snow plowing of the parking lot and associated activities would be relatively minor and short term. With the Forest's tremendous capacity to sequester and store carbon, the loss of forest trees under the action alternatives is unlikely to have a measurable effect on climate change.

#### Preferred Alternative

The Preferred Alternative for this project is Alternative 6. The Responsible Official feels this alternative best responds to the public comments received during the scoping period and throughout the planning process.



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## Changes from Draft to Final EIS

Many of the changes made between the Mt. Hood Meadows Parking Improvements Draft EIS and Final EIS were minor in nature and focused on grammatical corrections, editorial formatting, and clarification of data previously presented. These changes were driven by public comment and a comprehensive internal review. The more substantive changes are outlined in the following table.

Changes to FEIS	Location in DEIS
<b>Chapter 1</b>	
The number of cars turned away on peak days has been added and the previous use of the access roads has been updated to reflect the additional demand for parking.	Section 1.2
Description of compliance with the Survey and Manage Record of Decision (ROD) has been removed from Section 1.3.1, Management Direction. Compliance with this ROD is now discussed in Chapter 3 for each resource area.	Sections 3.5, 3.7 and 3.8
Added desired future condition related to limiting the parking from the Master Plan ROD.	Section 1.3.2
Added summary of the notice and comment period.	Section 1.6
Added summary of new objection process under the 218 Objection Regulations.	Section 1.6
<b>Chapter 2</b>	
Information was added regarding the fate of the existing fuel tanks associated with the maintenance shop that is being re-located.	Section 2.2.2
The clearing for authorized parking and percentage of the permit area was added to each action alternative.	Sections 2.2 and 2.5
Description of the Nordic ski trails connected action associated with Alternative 6 was updated to correct a mileage error.	Sections 2.2.6 and 2.5
Construction project design criteria were added to provide direction on sequencing the construction activities and use of the trees to be felled.	Section 2.3
The recommendations received from Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) were added to the monitoring section on transportation.	Section 2.4
The description of the Bear Grass Loop Parking Lot Alternative was updated to incorporate additional suggestions recommended in the notice and comment period.	Section 2.6.2
The use of the ODOT Maintenance Yard was added as an alternative considered, but Eliminated from Detailed Study.	Section 2.6.5
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
The impacts to the Nordic ski trails were updated to reflect the changes made in Chapter 2.	Section 3.1.3
The mileage for the Nordic ski trails under Alternative 6 was updated for all resource areas, as needed.	Chapter 3
The aquatics, wildlife and botany analyses was updated to follow the 2001 Survey & Manage Record of Decision.	Sections 3.5, 3.7, and 3.8
The aquatics, wildlife and botany analyses was updated to fully incorporate all sensitive species on the 2011 Regional Forester Sensitive Species list including western bumblebee and Whitebark pine.	Sections 3.5, 3.7, and 3.8

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Changes to FEIS	Location in DEIS
The wildlife analysis was updated to incorporate the survey results for the Survey and Manage mollusk species.	Section 3.7
The wildlife analysis was updated to incorporate the most recent management direction related to migratory birds.	Section 3.7
The description of the sensitive fungi species was updated to reflect new species information and changing to the updated Regional Forester Sensitive Species list.	Section 3.8
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
Consultation with Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) was updated to reflect additional government-to-government consultation.	Section 4.1.4
Consultation with tribes was updated to reflect additional government-to-government consultation with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.	Section 4.2
The distribution list was updated to reflect the FEIS mailing list.	Section 4.4
<b>Appendices</b>	
Response to Comments on the DEIS was added.	Appendix B
Letters from Governmental Agencies was added.	Appendix C